OXFORD HOUSE

A CONCEPT WORTH EXPANDING

Oxford House

In the Washington, D.C. area there are seventeen group houses which are home to about 170 individuals recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction. The Houses began 13 years ago, when a county-run half-way house closed, and have expanded solely from internally generated funds. It is truly a self-supported operation and democratically run like a college fraternity or sorority except members who relapse and use alcohol or drugs are thrown out. Each individual house is autonomous (like an AA group) and elects officers from its own members, who can only serve in office for six month periods of time. Each individual house is self-supporting. Each individual house has a charter from Oxford House, Inc., a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation, which is the umbrella organization that enables each house to share its experience, strength and hope with every other house.

The corporation has two entities: (1) the Oxford House Service Board, which helps new houses get started and existing houses to keep in close contact; and (2) the Oxford House Revolving Fund which loans start-up money to new houses.

Experience has shown that Oxford House fills a void in the field of treatment of alcoholism or drug addiction by providing transitional housing in a supportive environment free of alcohol or drug use. Simply stated the concept recognizes that relapse is one of the great deterrents to recovery from alcohol or drug addiction Many individuals in the recovery process do better when given time and a safe place to live to re-enforce the principle of abstinence fostered by AA and NA.

Oxford House is a supplement to -- not a replacement of-- other treatment facilities including traditional half-way houses. In October 1987 Oxford House branched out from the Washington area by starting a house in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It has worked as well as the houses in Washington and demonstrated that the concept can be replicated throughout the country. Oxford House owns no property. All of its houses are rented. It is classified as family-residential for zoning purposes since no formal treatment is undertaken in the individual houses.

Oxford House is not affiliated with AA or NA and has neither of those meetings within its houses. However, individual members of Oxford House attend an average of six AA or NA meetings a week. Moreover, the organization is patterned after AA and governance of the organization is through the development of consensus or group conscience.

If you would like more information about how to start an Oxford House in your area write or call the following contact people

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Oxford House-- A Concept Worth Expanding

Oxford House is unique among alcohol recovery facilities. Over the past 12 years during which it has grown from one to 13 houses, currently providing alcohol-free, low-cost housing to over 130 alcoholics, it has (1) never received a penny of outside support, public or private, or asked for outside support, (2) never been mentioned in any newspaper article or television show, (3) never had a paid staff member, and (4) the umbrella organization which oversees expansion has operated without funds or a bank account.

Yet since 1975 Oxford Houses have been home to well over 1,000 alcoholics during the crucial early months and years of recovery. The Oxford House system was designed by newly recovering alcoholics to be self-supporting and self-governing. It is a place where people live while working and paying their own way. The impetus for recovery comes from helping one another and attending AA meetings. Oxford House acts as a substitute family even for those who have lost families, jobs and standing in the community, who often have no other place to go, and for whom staying sober on their own would be a lonely, difficult undertaking.

In 1988 Oxford House has decided to ask for limited funding to share the concept with others through creation of an Oxford House Service Board and the Oxford House Revolving Fund to provide seed money for new houses.

Over the years, many thousands of additional people have called Oxford Houses hoping to become residents only to be told there is no room. While Oxford House has grown it has done so sporadically, depending on the initiative and resources of those living in existing houses. With a lean, low-overhead office and some seed money to get new houses started, we believe we can more than double the number of houses in the Washington, D.C. area over the next two years and share the concept with people in other parts of the country by mail and in person. Part-time efforts this past six months have lead to one house being opened in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the genesis of another in Roanoke, Virginia. The objective is an expansion of the number of Oxford Houses to provide more alcohol-free, supportive housing without changing the ethic of self-support.

Since Oxford House has operated successfully for over 12 years without financial support, a reasonable observer might wonder why outside support is necessary and if outside funding would weaken the self-help nature of the organization. To help answer these questions we will give a brief history of

the organization, telling how we expanded in the past, why we want to expand more quickly and in a more methodical manner, and list the barriers to expansion.

History

Oxford House was founded in October, 1975 after Montgomery County, Maryland decided to close a halfway house for alcoholics because of budget constraints. The men in the house -- called Alpha I and located just north of the District of Columbia -- didn't want to move. They had attained a few month's sobriety and were fearful of losing it if forced out into solitary, substandard housing, which was all most of them could afford.

They talked to the man who contracted to run the halfway houses for the county, himself a member of AA, and found both he and the county eager to relinquish the lease on the house. As a sweetener, if they would assume the lease, the residents were told they could keep the halfway house furniture.

They filed for not-for-profit incorporation status and assumed control of the halfway house. Lacking any financial support the men decided the house would be self-supporting rather than trying to raise money. Lacking money to hire a manager, they decided to run it themselves by majority rule.

The long list of behavioral rules in the halfway house (curfews, mandatory attendance at AA meetings, lights out, etc.) were discarded and only one ruled saved: drinking or taking drugs would result in immediate expulsion. To this they added the rule that each member would have to pay his share of expenses. There were to be no other broad rules. Oxford House would be like a home where each person did as he pleased so long as he stayed sober, paid his rent and didn't unduly disrupt others. In many ways it became analogous to a college fraternity.

A president, treasurer and comptroller were elected to help run the business of the house. To avoid the problem of strong personalities, it was decided that nobody could serve in any office for more than six months. All decisions governing the house would be made at a weekly meeting by majority vote, except an 80 percent vote would be required to accept new residents. There would be no time limit on residency. Members themselves would decide when they felt strong enough in their sobriety to move out. Eggs, bacon, potatoes, milk, coffee and other staples would be paid for with general house funds in case new residents lacked money to eat.

Shortly after becoming independent they wrote an Oxford House Manual describing in detail how an Oxford House works and setting forth nine traditions of the organization such as self support and democratic rule.

One of the first acts the group faced on becoming Oxford House was to prove it could respond responsibly and expel the first resident who drank. The organization has never wavered from that stance. The first responsibility of any Oxford House is to protect the sober environment by ejecting anybody who drinks or takes drugs.

Even though the first house didn't reach its capacity of 13 residents for over two months, the group easily met all expenses with a weekly rental of $30 per person.

Once paying their own way and managing their own affairs, the changes in attitude were palpable. Feelings of dependence and defeat were replaced with independence and pride. They bought new curtains and painted the upstairs and began to take better care of the property. Perhaps the story of how the first Oxford House made possible startup of the second house best represents their new-found pride and desire to share a good idea..

By May of 1976, six months after it was in existence, the first house had accumulated a surplus of $1,200. Oxford House had also acquired a reputation in the AA community as a good place to live while getting sober. The telephone began to ring every day and would-be residents were told there was no room.

Feeling badly about the lack of space, some of the residents began talking of opening a second house. The issue was brought up at a house meeting and residents were faced with a number of options to dispose of the $1,200 surplus. They could not pay rent for a month, buy a new stereo and color TV, or they could give the money away to begin a second house. There was a motion to donate the money to help start a new house. There was no discussion and the motion carried unanimously. Only great pride in what they had created could have compelled 13 men of very limited means to give away nearly $100 each to duplicate what they had started.

A loan of $1,000 was acquired in addition to the $1,200 and a second house was leased in Washington, D.C. Four men from the first house moved there to get it underway.

In a couple of months both houses were full and again newly-sober

alcoholics hoping to live in them called daily. The two houses met and decided to keep expanding. This time there were two houses to help start a third, then there were three houses to help start a fourth house.....Within three years , although most of the original residents had moved on, there were eight Oxford Houses in Washington and Montgomery County. Since then, as the housing market has become tighter and more expensive, the rate of expansion has slowed.

Even with 12 houses in the Washington area the telephones ring every day at nearly every house with shaky alcoholics hoping to find a safe, sober place to live.

Oxford House has never owned any property. This has caused disruption when owners have decided to sell houses we occupied or to resume living in them themselves. But, because it takes only a small fraction of the amount to rent a house as it does to buy one, leasing houses lends itself to great flexibility and a large number of recovering alcoholics can be housed with little up-front money.

Oxford House looks for owners who want long-term tenants. Three houses have been in the same location for more than 10 years.

In the years before the organization matured, several houses were failures. One, for instance, was a house for both men and women. Mixing the sexes at that stage of recovery was detrimental to sobriety, so the sober women were moved to another house and the house was converted to an all-male residence. There are now two houses for women and they work well.

Oxford House Leads the Way

Oxford House is clearly in the forefront of a national trend to examine ways to provide low cost or self-supporting transitional housing. Oxford House began doing it nearly a decade before governments began experiments[1].

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[1]On the national level, extensive research shows a great need for low-cost sober housing. "Alcoholism treatment professionals have long recognized the 'revolving door' syndrome that sometimes traps people in a cycle of drinking, short-term treatment, and a return to drinking. This cycle is based, at least in part, on lack of adequate, affordable living environments that provide support for newly achieved sobriety," write Sue Korenbaum and Gina Burney in Alcohol Health & Research World, a publication of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Not only is there a shortage of affordable living environments to provide support for

Oxford House or Oxford House-type houses are the lowest cost way we can imagine to help solve the national problem of providing low-cost housing for people recovering from alcoholism, and for those homeless who have alcohol and drug abuse problems and are able to work and participate in the running of a house. Once in operation, an Oxford House never again needs outside support. On the contrary, there has always been a great sense of pride, fervor and wanting to give something back to Oxford House and houses have freely donated to help start other houses.

The Oxford House concept may also have applications for other groups in need of transitional housing.

Barriers to Expansion

Oxford House is readily expandable, as we have demonstrated over the past 12 years, growing from one to 13 houses with no financial support and no staff. Yet we have only begun to satisfy the demand.

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newly achieved sobriety but there is a rapid disappearance of any low-cost housing for alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike according to dozens of researchers. "Transitional accommodations such as boarding houses, single room occupancy apartments and residential hotels have all but disappeared in the United States and Canada, " according to the Association of Halfway House Alcoholism Programs of North America, Inc. Further, says the association, "It also appears that halfway house space for people with little or no income has diminished, compared to 20 years ago....Many halfway houses have been influenced by government funding agencies to join the mainstream of the health care system and transform into residential treatment programs."

So in the past 20 years while recovery options for those with money and insurance have greatly expanded, housing options for the newly-sober alcoholic with limited means have contracted. This is unfortunate because as Dr. James D. Wright of the University of Massachusetts writes, "The best alcohol and drug treatment facilities in the world will have but minimal effect if, at the end of treatment, the door swings open and the client return, once again, to life on the streets."

Faced with the staggering costs of providing treatment and housing for alcoholics and drug addicts and housing for the homeless, about 40 percent of whom have alcohol problems, local governments have begun to experiment with self-supporting, self-governing houses. For instance, in the last couple of years Los Angeles County has started four self-governing, nearly self-supporting houses, called alcohol free living centers. There is also a 174 bed sober hotel in San Francisco.

"We think that what is needed is not continued treatment programs--therapy and case management. Rather, the person who has gained good initial support for sobriety needs a living environment which reinforces his alcohol-free life style," said Dr. Wayne Clark, director of alcoholism programs in San Francisco.

Through the years many people have mentioned to us that Oxford Houses are needed in certain areas, or alerted us to houses for lease that would make perfect Oxford Houses. Because the organization has had no bank account and other careers have left us with limited time, by the time we could organize to get the money together to lease the houses they are off the market. Even when we have been able to lease houses it has been difficult finding people, time and a van to round up a full house of furniture.

Self-help groups can expand with a coffee pot and a modest rental taken from a weekly collection. Oxford Houses take about $5,000 up-front to pay the first month's rent, a security deposit equal to a month's rent, curtains, moving expenses, purchase of some furniture, and other incidental start-up expenses.

Without ready funds and people available to handle jobs associated with startup--looking for and leasing houses, organizing new residents, collecting furniture, getting utilities turned on, etc. -- we have not been able to respond to many opportunities and houses have slipped through our fingers.

Without an office or a staff, we have had no outreach either in the Washington area or out of town. In fact, Oxford House isn't listed in the telephone directory and there is no reliable place to go to get information on how to start a house.

Solutions

The impediments to expansion and a smooth running organization can be removed with modest funding.

With modest funding Oxford House would establish a service office. With two people employed full-time in that office and seed money for house startup, we believe we can more than double the number of Oxford Houses in the Washington, D.C. area in two years. Perhaps more important for the long-term, we want to begin to respond to people in other areas who want to start Oxford Houses or Oxford House-type houses. This will require correspondence and in-person visits.

Oxford House is one of two organizations providing transitional housing which will be included in an upcoming National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism study of innovative ways to aid homeless alcoholics. We have been warned to expect inquiries from all over the country from people wanting to imitate the Oxford House success. We need funding to

adequately respond to those inquiries, expected in the first half of 1988.

We want to expand first in Washington because there is such a great need, and we want to learn to operate with outside funding without losing the sense of independence and self-responsibility, and without weakening the tradition of self-support.

We want to respond to and reach out to people in other parts of the country because there is absolutely no reason why Oxford House can't work anywhere.

For further information call or write: John V. O'Neill, 4911 Aurora Drive, Kensington, Maryland 20895, (301) 933-6251, or: J. Paul Molloy, 9314 Colesville Road, Silver Spring, Maryland 20901, (301) 587-2916.

3/88